



# Practice + Relax

## Keys to SAT/ACT Preparation

BY COURTNEY WATSON

If you've ever tried to learn how to play a sport or an instrument, or give a speech in front of an audience, you probably remember that the more nervous you were, the harder it was. It's like getting stage fright, when you can barely get the words out. Once you relaxed and started gaining confidence, the easier it became to perform, right?

It's the same when preparing for the SAT or ACT. You want to be focused and prepared (from all of your good study habits) without being tense, anxious or worried. We'll give you some general ideas for doing your best on the SAT and ACT, but remember, a little preparation can go a long way to help you relax come test time. And chances are that the less stressed you are, the better you'll do on the exams. ▶

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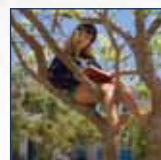
► *Morgan Cable* graduated from the Wilkes Honors College in 2005 and is now a Ph.D. student in chemistry at CalTech.

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### A Weighty Matter

We all realize the importance of standardized tests. The majority of colleges and universities in the United States require applicants to take either the SAT or ACT. Admission committees place a lot of weight on test scores. In fact, test scores and GPA combined are the biggest factors taken into account by most admission committees. Many times, an applicant will be accepted or denied based on these factors alone. However, “many” doesn’t mean “all the time,” and very often other factors such as activities, essays and recommendations can turn a decision one way or the other. Furthermore, a lower SAT or ACT score can sometimes be offset by a high GPA.

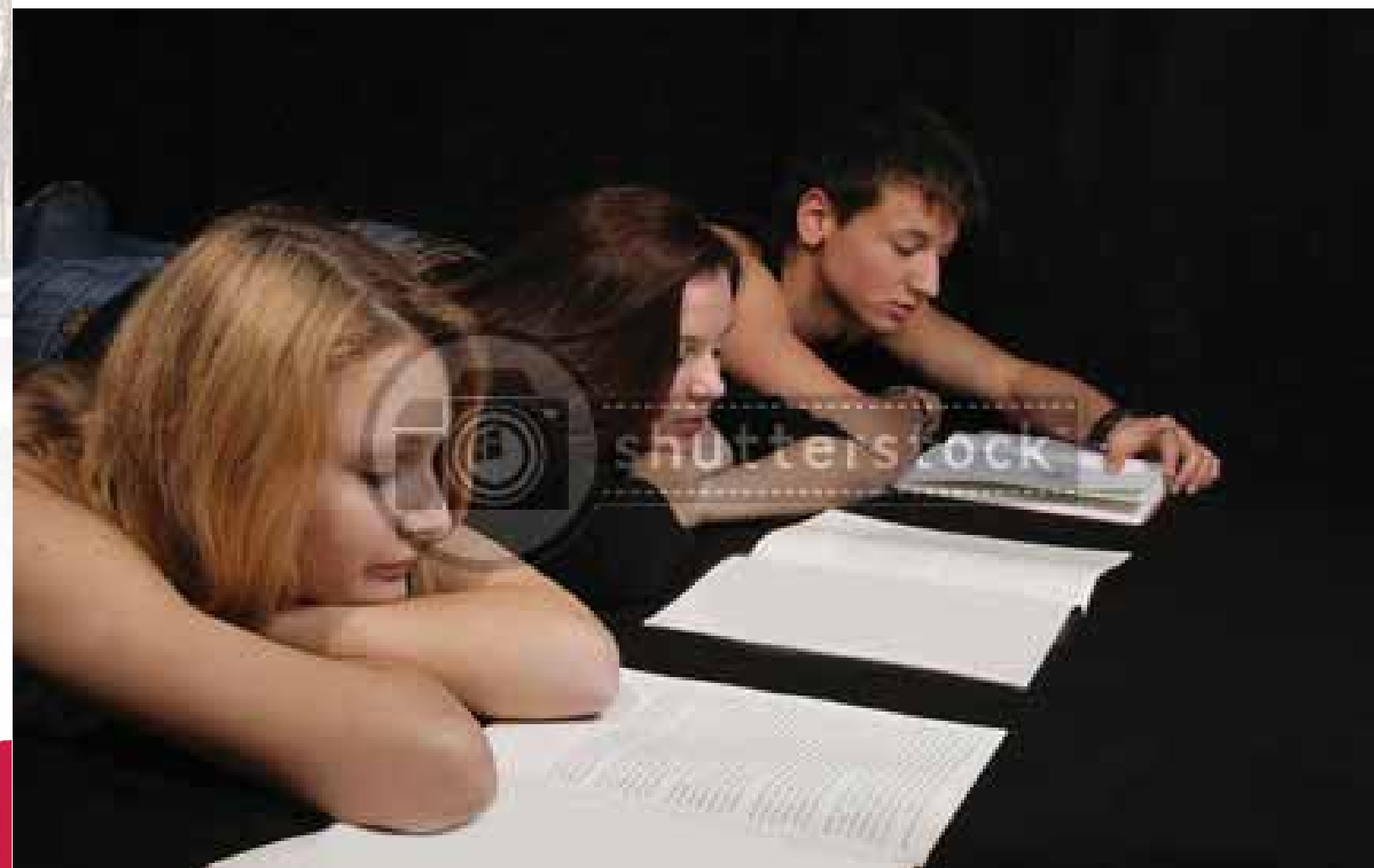
### Which Test Should I Take?

The ACT is a three-hour exam that covers a wide range of classroom-based information. There are four sections to the test: English, math, reading and science, plus a 30-minute writing portion that many colleges require. Unlike the SAT, anything that you have learned in school up to grade 12 is fair game for a test question. Each section of the test is scored and then averaged, for a composite score of 1 to 36.

Ed Colby, a representative from the ACT, describes the test as a curriculum-based exam that measures what students have learned in school. The ACT covers material ranging from very basic skills to very advanced

skills in the tested subjects. Colby agrees that practice is the best way to learn to navigate the test, and he believes that the more high school classes students have taken prior to taking the ACT, the better, which is why students should plan on taking it during their junior year. ►

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## Critical Reading + Math + Writing = SAT

“It’s a very good idea for students to take practice ACT tests so that they are familiar with the test format and types of questions asked,” Colby says. “If a student wishes to take a prep course, we recommend taking a content review-based course that focuses on academic skills and knowledge, rather than on test-taking strategies.”

The SAT is a 3-hour-and-45-minute exam composed of critical reading, math and writing sections. Each section is scored on a 200- to 800-point scale, with 2400 being the highest possible score.

So what test-taking strategies should you consider? It depends on the test.

While the ACTs don’t penalize you for wrong answers, the SATs do (at least for multiple-choice questions). So, on the SAT, it’s probably better to leave a question blank than guess if you don’t have a good idea of the answer. Still, if you can rule out one or more answers for multiple-choice questions, you have a better chance of guessing correctly.

Judy Zodda, an educational consultant who assists high school students and their families in the college ▶

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search, also points out that managing your time is important when taking the tests. “The SAT has problems called ‘detractors’ that take more time to figure out. Because there are penalties for guessing on the SAT, managing your time when working on these types of questions also means knowing when to move on if you don’t know the answer.”

A good rule of thumb? Answer the easy questions first and mark questions in your booklet that you want to go back to later if you have time.

Choosing between taking the ACT or SAT is generally dependent on whether you think you would do better on more of an “aptitude” test (the SAT) or a test that covers your knowledge or achieve-

ment of specific subject matters (the ACT). If you’re unsure which test you’ll do better on, consider taking both.

## When to Take the SAT or ACT

Judi Robinovitz, founder of Score at the Top, an educational consulting and tutoring company, says that students should plan on taking the SAT or ACT in their junior year after getting back the results of the PSAT. That gives them time to take it again before colleges review their application.

Colleges see all of your SAT scores, which is why you should never take a real SAT test as a practice exam. However, most colleges take either the highest score on each section or the highest overall score, which provides some comfort if you don’t do well on one particular section. You should take the SAT again if you feel like you can improve your score significantly (for example, at least 50 points per section for the SAT). Most students do improve (assuming they study again). However, if you score high enough the first time to comfortably get into the school(s) in which you’re most interested, then it may not pay to put the time and effort into retaking the test.

Robinovitz says that ACT score reports, unlike the SAT, are not cumulative, so they don’t show each attempt. Therefore, she encourages students not to be disappointed if they don’t do well the first time. Robinovitz cautions that it is generally not advisable to take the SAT or ACT more than three times.

Kerry Hoyt, Vice President of The Princeton Review, believes that it is important for students to have reasonable expectations for their improvement on standardized tests. “If a student scores a a combined score of 1800 on the SAT, [he or she] can raise his/her score significantly. For a student starting with a 2200, it’s much more difficult to raise [his or her] scores significantly,” Hoyt said.

## Prep like a Pro

You’ll need to develop your own style and method of preparing for the SAT and/or ACT. Some students do better by taking a review/prep course, some can do it on their own with study guides, and some may require private tutoring, although that can be expensive. In all cases, however, preparation for the ACT or SAT should include taking as many practice exams as you can until you feel confident enough to sit for the real thing.

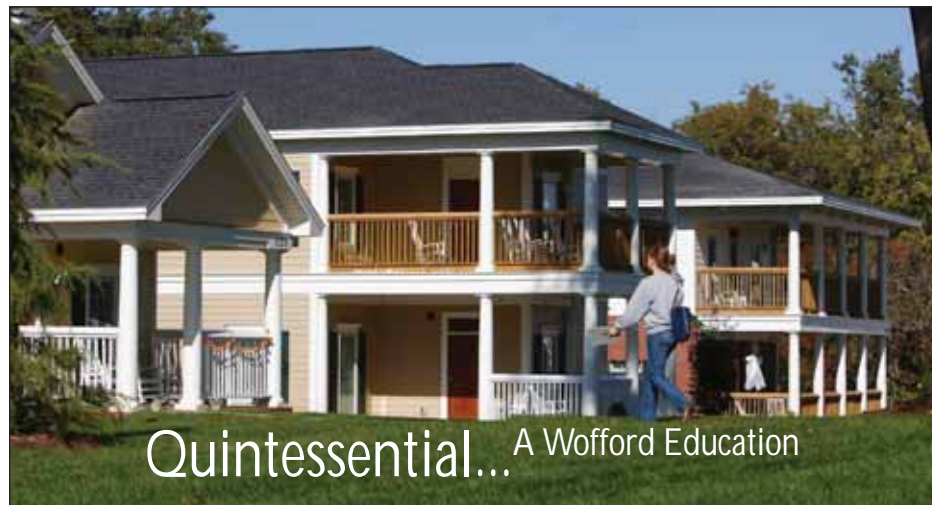
The best practice exams for students to take come from actual old tests. Only a couple of books contain questions from genuine tests, so students need to be sure they are getting the real thing. Old SATs are only published by the College Board, and old ACTs are only published by Harcourt Brace and the ACT. Some students also take SAT/ACT prep courses, which are offered in most high schools and through test preparation companies. These courses usually consist of six to eight weeks of group classes or private tutoring sessions.

Junior Kristen Chambers says that she is glad she purchased study guides and practice books prior to taking the PSAT.

“The practice books really helped with my vocabulary. I made up note cards and practiced going through them quickly, and the practice vocabulary sections became a lot easier and less stressful because I recognized a lot of

the words,” said Chambers.

According to Brandon Jones, Director of College Prep Programs for Kaplan Test Prep and Admissions, “Just as an athlete wouldn’t go into a championship game without having practiced all season, or a performer wouldn’t go on stage without having rehearsed their performance, neither should anyone go into these ▶



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tests unprepared. Preparation can make a big difference in your score on these tests, and your test score can make a difference in where you end up going to school.”

Brian O'Reilly, Executive Director of SAT Program Relations for The College Board, recommends that students take a proactive approach to test

preparation early on by taking a rigorous course load. That means, if you're thinking about taking regular Algebra II but you did really well in Algebra I, consider challenging yourself with Algebra II Honors instead. O'Reilly also believes that study guides are a great way to familiarize yourself with the tests, which will help ease your anxiety in the long run.

## Stay Cool!

One of the biggest obstacles that most students have to overcome is dealing with the stress of preparing for and taking these tests. There is no better preparation for an SAT or ACT than actually sitting for a timed practice exam in a simulated test setting. When taking practice tests don't stress out and get mad at yourself for messing up a section or having trouble with a particular concept – that's why they call it practice. Zodda likes to put the situation in perspective by examining the big picture.

Zodda encourages students to remember that “standardized tests are only one component out of several when evaluating an applicant for admission, and testing is not the component at the top of the list. Your transcript (grades) and the rigor of your course load are ahead of test scores.”

Jacqueline Byrne of Ivy Ed, a company that provides test preparation services, points out that almost all of the students they see “are very happy at the college they attend, even if it was not their first choice.” Byrne says to keep this “big secret” in mind and advises students to just “take the tests and then go back to being a teenager!”

## Be Realistic

When planning on which colleges to apply to it is important to have a general idea of your score range (another reason why practice tests

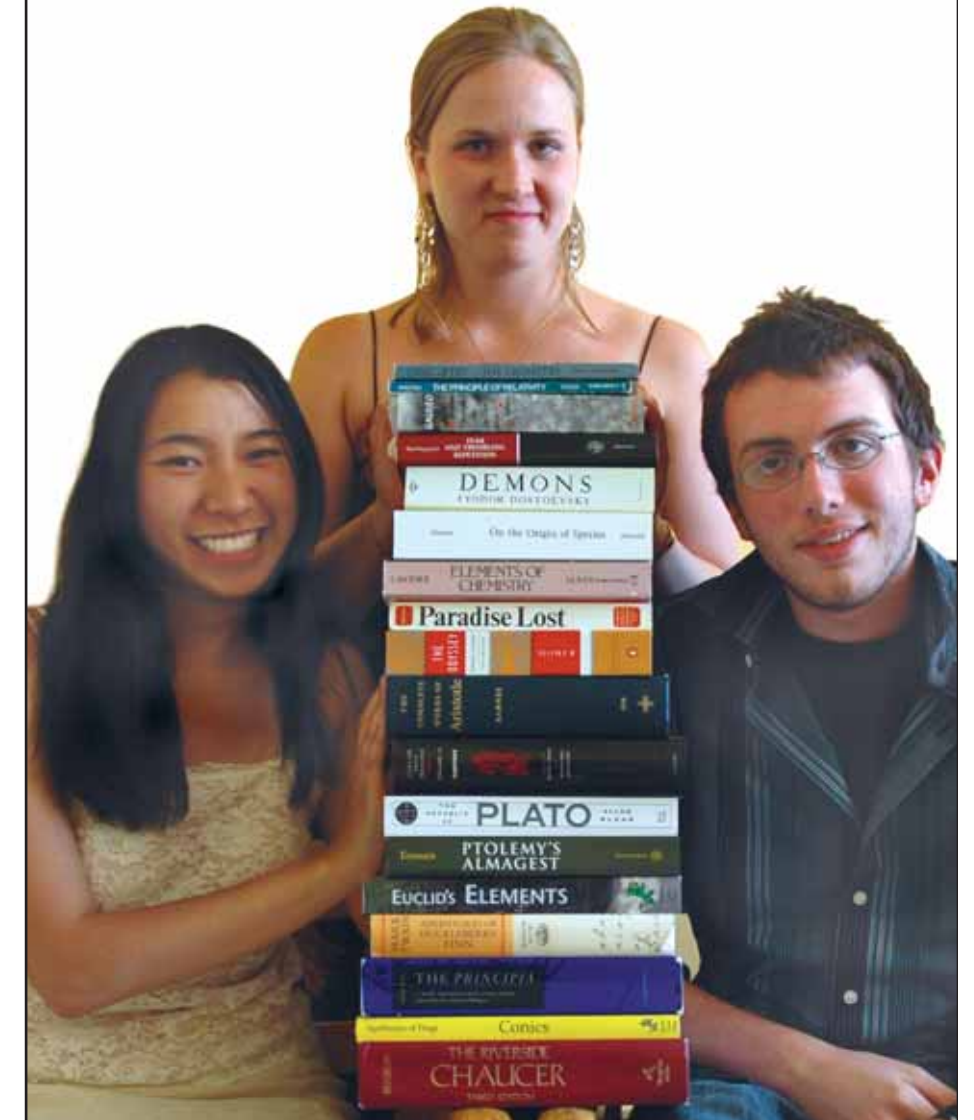
are so important). When researching colleges that you think you might be interested in, find out the mid-50% test score and GPA range of applicants the school accepted the previous year. These numbers will help you find out whether or not you have a realistic shot of getting into that school. (But remember, in a close case, your activities, essays and recommendations will be key.)

For some schools your score may be right on target, and for others your scores may need a little work. You don't have to be right there, but it's important to be in the ballpark, especially in borderline cases and for more selective schools where many students have high test scores and good GPAs.

Whether you are preparing to take the SAT or ACT for the first time or you are trying to improve upon an earlier score, don't get hung up on getting into the highest ranked, top-tier schools. It's nice to be wanted by a school with a great reputation, but make sure that you want them, too. There are many factors you should consider in selecting a college, such as strength in your intended major, size, location, financial aid availability and clubs, activities and social life. It's not the end of the world if you don't get into an Ivy League university – there are a lot great schools with exceptional programs out there and you need to find the one that is the best fit for you.

*Courtney Watson is a graduate of the University of Miami School of Communications, where she majored in print journalism. She is a freelance writer in South Florida.*

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